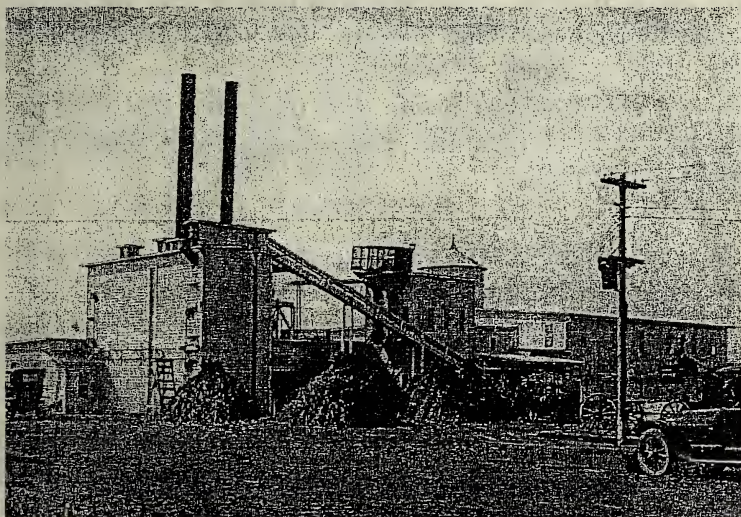


# WACONIA SORGHUM MILL



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Sorghum was a popular sweetener in the early 1900's and Wessale's Sorghum Mill in Waconia was a leading producer of sorghum at that time. John Wessale built his sorghum mill in 1901. By 1929 his sons were shipping two million gallons of sorghum nationwide.

Waconia Sorghum Mill's actual beginning dates back to the 1880's when John Wessale of Waconia began making sorghum on his farm. In 1901 John Wessale built a mill on Third Street between Orange and Oak Streets. By 1903 he had processed nearly 5000 gallons of sorghum. The August 1904 tornado destroyed the Wessale home and damaged the mill so badly that it had to be rebuilt, but it was ready for operation again by September 30, 1904.

Wessale bought a 25-horsepower engine two years later which provided more power to handle the ever-increasing acreage of cane being grown. The mill used a combination of steam and gasoline and had its own electric lighting plant. Much of the machinery for turning sugar cane into sorghum was built on the spot. A patented carrier moved the cane to the press where the juice was pressed into tanks and the pulp was hauled to a straw pile on the opposite side of the mill. The juice tanks removed all of the impurities. The purified juice was piped to a cooler and then to large storage tanks from which it was put into barrels or cans, ready for shipping. In October 1909, the sorghum mill was running day and night to handle the cane being hauled in and 14,000 gallons of sorghum were processed.

John. Wessale and his sons, Frank and Edward, were always finding ways to improve the process of sorghum making. John's youngest son George graduated from the University of Minnesota and joined the company later as technical advisor and assistant superintendent.

Cane growing was considered profitable. Farmers received about \$50 per acre total profit and still had enough sorghum

for home use. The Wessales processed 50,000 gallons of sorghum in 1912. With continued improvements the mills could handle more crops, so they started running day and night seven days a week the next season. The improvements included: the installation of a juice heater for better clarification, an automatic lime feeder, a counter which registered the number of gallons of juice pressed during a day, an automatic neutralizer for the juice, a cane feeder gauge for measuring the amount of cane fed to the press, and a device for gauging syrup in store tanks.

John turned the sorghum mill completely over to his three sons in 1914. The sons were already incorporating some of their inventions into the mill. As the mill grew, so did the number of people employed. The Wessales supplied the farmers with free seeds of good quality and instructions for planting. Because the seed was planted in rows with corn planters, the rows needed both hoeing and cultivating. When the cane was ripe, it was stripped of leaves and the seed heads were chopped off. The cane was then cut and tied into bundles. An advertisement of May 5, 1915, offered, "for a ton of stripped cane (leaves removed) delivered at the mill, you will receive nine gallons of pure sorghum syrup or \$4.50 cash; for unstripped cane, eight gallons or \$4 cash.

The Wessales employed about 30 workers in the fields for planting, cultivating and harvesting in 1916. For safety reasons, children were no longer allowed to visit the mill while in operation unless accompanied by an adult. Visitors came from far and wide to watch the process. Adeline Radde remembers her own visit in 1911, at age seven, accompanied by her grandmother.

*"Auntie Wessale was tending and skimming the impurities from the open pans of juice that were evaporating. Although I held onto grandma's hand, I was frightened—it was very hot and humid in there. Another thing I remember is the farmers passing through town with wagon boxes and hayracks loaded with cane. We would follow the cane wagons and sometimes*



*pull out a few stalks to chew for the juice. Every one of us got a sore mouth from sucking on the cane but it was worth it."*

Adeline's family moved to the farm in 1917 and planted cane. Adeline relates.

*"I could drive horses, and so the cultivating with the single row cultivator became my job. Grandma and I also did the hoeing the first year. The next year, my younger sisters also hoed. I learned to strip cut off the seeds, chop the cane and tie it into bundles. By the time I was eighteen we had a long truck and occasionally I would take the cane to the sorghum mill. We usually took 30 to 40 gallons of syrup home for use. Every kid in school had sorghum on his or her bread to eat with home made cold sausage. At around Christmastime my folks would get a check for about \$200 for the sorghum the factory got from our crop, over what we had taken on in sorghum. This was always a time we looked forward to as it was used mainly for family Christmas gifts."*

Because of the war and the shortage of sugar, hundreds of farmers increased their cane acreage as it brought in good returns. The cane was easy to grow with adequate rainfall and was a good soil builder.

Syrup was retailing at a dollar per gallon. Returns were approximately \$100 per acre with an average yield from 15 to 18 tons per acre. Besides the "juice crop" one could get from ten to fifteen bushels of seed per acre. During the 1919 season, the mills were running 24 hours every day during the season and processed 1500 to 2000 gallons each day. At least 52 men and women were employed to keep the plant in operation during the season.

Edward Wessale had conceived the idea to use the cane straw as fuel for the boilers and built the machinery to accomplish it. In 1918 the Wessales received new machinery to add to their equipment which recovered more juice and left the sorghum refuse in a drier condition, making better fuel for the boilers. That same year Edward and Frank invented a large

filter press and new topping machine. The topping machine saved a lot of seed. The Wessale brothers were dedicated to improving both the taste and texture of their sorghum. Frank and Edward visited the southern sugar industries and brought back new ideas. Several men from California tried to convince the Wessale brothers to put up a sorghum plant in California. The Wessales decided against the plan because they had invented most of their machinery and patents were still pending.

In 1920 Paul Kemske was hired as the first salesman. Eventually August Graff, W.J. Kuntz, and others joined the sales force. They advertised their sorghum as "Minnesota's Greatest Spread for Bread."

In 1921 the Wessales procured a warehouse in Minneapolis to store sorghum for the Twin Cities area. That same year, the Wessales received a call for help from the management of the new sorghum mills in Modesto, California. Frank went to California to help them get the machinery working.

In early 1922, the Waconia Sorghum mills were incorporated with a capital of \$100,000; about fifty businessmen bought shares. The first board of directors were: Edward Wessale, general manager, Frank Wessale, superintendent, P.E. Kemske, sales manager, William J. Scharmer, field manager, O. J. Kuntz, O.C. Brunin, and J. Effertz.

P.E. Kemske, always interested in promoting new products, went to Vermont in June of 1923, and brought maple syrup back to Waconia. At the Food Show in Duluth that fall he was demonstrating the use of Waconia sorghum syrup, Waconia maple syrup, Waconia cane and maple syrup and Waconia honey. This idea became rather popular and in 1924 Kemske purchased carloads of maple syrup. By July of that year, orders were coming in from all of the United States, Canada, England and several cities in Germany.

The Wessale brothers continued to receive requests from other places to build sorghum factories. In 1924, the Corporation purchased the newly built sorghum mill in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The Northwest Commercial Bulletin reported, "the buildings are of the latest type of steel construction which makes them fireproof, highly wind resistant and of good appearance. They are grouped about a double line of trackage, making them accessible for unloading finished products with the least possible labor." By 1928, 550 acres around Waconia were planted in sorghum and 1,750 acres around Cedar Rapids.

Dr. J. J. Williamson from the University of Minnesota worked with the chemical research department and improved the strain of Minnesota Amber sorghum, called Waconia. The *Waconia Patriot* quoted a December 1924 national technical magazine:

*"About five years ago, it was decided that some improvement was possible in the Minnesota Amber sorghum that had been grown at Waconia for a great many years. Therefore, some selection work was started with the object of improving the strain along four principal lines - sugar content of the juice, tonnage, earliness and resistance to head smut. This new strain, called the Waconia Amber, is considerably superior in all of these respects. Yield of tonnage to the acre has been increased about 25% giving the farmers a larger return."*

The Wessale brothers' constant inventiveness kept improving the process so that all the by products except the roots were used. The seed was dried, graded and sold for planting or chicken feed, and the leaves were dried and ground into a fine meal. The refuse left after the crushing process was burned in furnaces and the energy used for drying or to produce steam. The refuse furnished almost 90% of the power required at the mills. The February 4, 1926 *Waconia Patriot* reported that a national technical magazine's story about the Waconia sorghum plant included the editor's note. The editor states:

*"One would hardly look to the sorghum industry for examples of chemical and mechanical engineering but in the Waconia plant, the*



*editors of Chemical and Metallurgical Engineering (magazine) have found one of the most conspicuous examples of clever engineering practices they have ever seen."*

In April 1929, the Waconia Sorghum Mills Inc. purchased the large sorghum plant at South Fort Smith, Arkansas, which had an appraised value of more than \$400,000. The administration continued to be centered in Waconia with the Wessale brothers heading the company. The Arkansas mill was built in 1914 so the Wessales installed their patented equipment. With all three plants running, more than two million cans of sorghum were marketed.

A series of regular weekly radio programs were broadcast for the Waconia Sorghum Mills Inc. over radio station WCCO in Minneapolis and a Memphis, Tennessee station. Radio listeners were entertained with "Waconia Sorghum and Waconia music for your dinner hour."

In May 1930 the board of directors voted to move the Waconia Sorghum offices to St. Louis. The rapid increase in sales and production in the southern and central states made St. Louis an advantageous location for shipping, sales and administration. Edward Wessale moved to St. Louis, Frank oversaw the Cedar Rapids plant and George moved to Fort Smith, Arkansas. The 1931 fall run went smoothly with a record amount of sorghum produced. By July 1933 the Waconia mill was put up for sale, and in 1937 the District Court authorized the sale of the Cedar Rapids plant to the three Wessale brothers.

The Wessale brothers have passed on and the mills have been demolished. Edward died in 1969, Frank in 1978 and George in 1984. That era is gone but Waconia sorghum seed can be purchased today. Recipes for gingerbread and fruitcake using Waconia sorghum can be found on the Internet, and the inventiveness and success of the Wessales will always be a part of Waconia's history.

## WACONIA HERITAGE ASSOCIATION

The Waconia Heritage Association (WHA) was organized in 1983 for the purpose of preserving and memorializing the history of the Waconia community and its people. WHA is a non-profit organization.

WACONIA, PARADISE OF THE NORTHWEST, Volume 1, The "Lake and Its Island", was first published in 1986. This 240 page hardcover book was reprinted in 2007 as part of Waconia's sesquicentennial celebration. The original printing of the book has been sold out for some time. The reprint of Volume 1 is now available for sale at the Carver County Historical Society, The Waconia Chamber of Commerce, Waconia City Hall, and Mackenthun's County Market.

Originally, the book was intended to be the first of a trilogy of books which would tell the story of Waconia's history. The first book relates the history of the lake and its island. The second and third books were to relate the history of the Organizations, Businesses, and People of the Waconia area. Given the rise in publishing costs, the board members of WHA decided to include all these subjects in one volume and to extend those histories through 2007. Both books are researched and written by a host of volunteer members of the Waconia community. The publication date of the second volume will be announced in The Patriot.

In addition to the book writing, WHA is compiling a subject matter file which includes the original research and drafts that went into the writing/editing of the two books. The WHA also has assisted in placing landmarks on the National Register of Historic Places. The WHA has published a brochure, "Landmarks In and Around Waconia, Minnesota", which lists these Landmarks and presents a short history of each of them.

WHA has an office at the Waconia City Hall and hosts a booth at Nickle Dickle Day in City Square. We invite you to stop by or leave a message for us at (952) 442-2184, ext. 1013. We welcome new members and volunteers.